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THE SATURDAY EVENING NOVEL

The Evening World

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Who Was John Pendleton?

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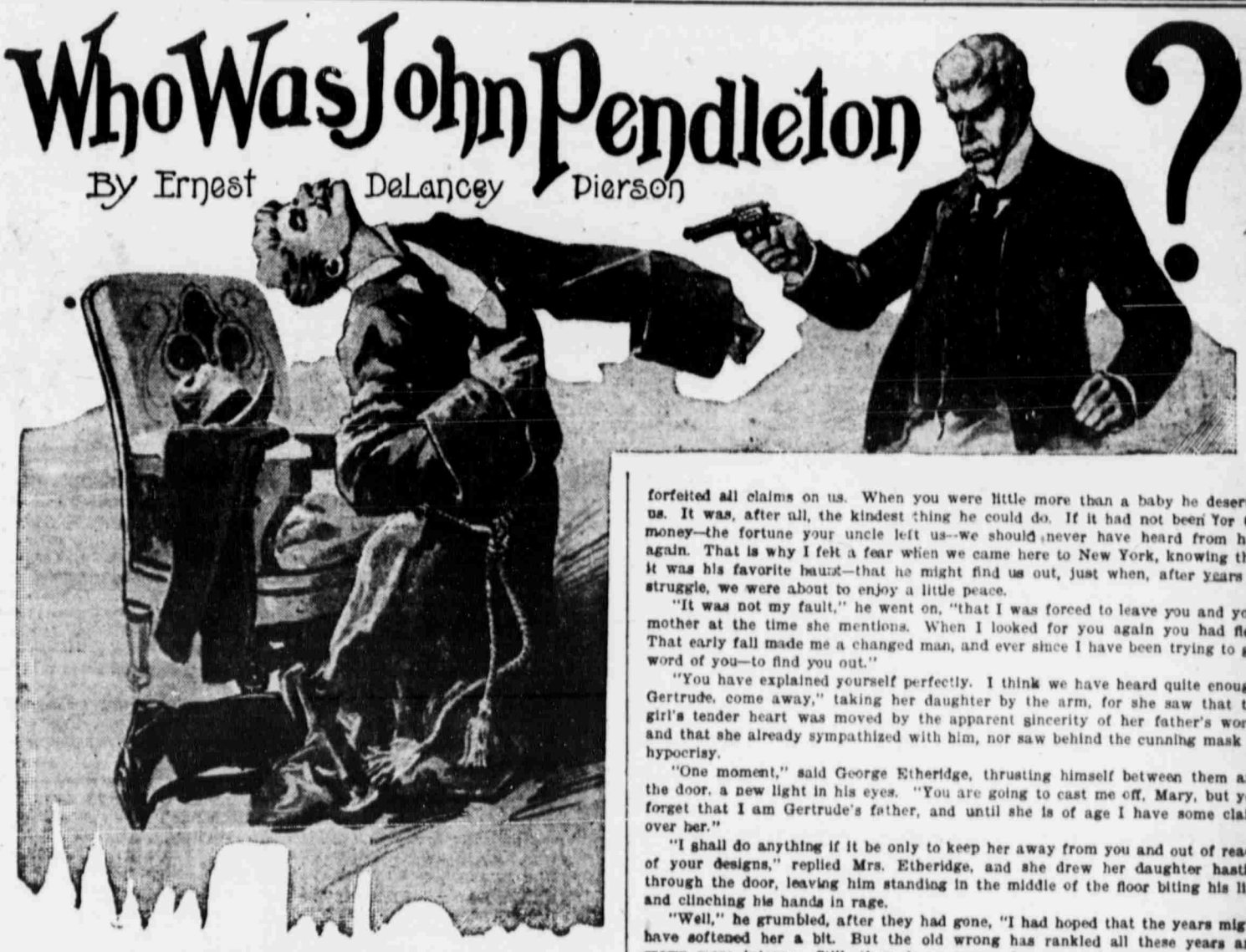

CHAPTER I.

A Change of Identity.

THE long French window leading from the porch to John Pendleton's sleeping-room opened silently and a man stepped into the dim-lit apartment.

He was tall, thin, and dressed in a ragged, mud-stained dress-suit. A mane of gray hair fell over his eyes, and a three days' growth of grizzled stubble defaced his chin. He was panting from a long run and dripping wet from the pouring midnight rain. His keen eyes swept the luxurious room. He tiptoed across to the curtained bed, whence came the sound of heavy breathing. His glance fell on an empty glass and a vial of sleeping potion on a table and he nodded grimly. With a swift look at his own reflection in the mirror and then at a neat tweed suit lying on a chair, he quickly divested himself of his soaked, torn garments and donned the tweeds. To his surprise they were a perfect fit. Next, with a smile at his own effrontery, he proceeded to take up a silver shaving set and to remove his stubbly beard. As he did so he was startled by a noise from the bed.

He turned to see a tall figure in a dressing gown emerge from the curtains. The surprise on both men's faces was not only ludicrous but identical. For each man was the physical double of the other.

"Why—why, John!" gasped the intruder at length. "To think of my blundering into your house. They told me years ago that you were dead!"

"What are you doing here?" sternly asked the householder.

"I got into a little brush with the police," airily remarked the other. "New York was too hot for me, so I came out here to Marshfield. My friends, the police, tracked me. In fact, I only gave them the slip by climbing over your garden gate. And now"——

"Go!" cried the man in the dressing gown, trembling violently and snatching up a pistol. The intruder sprang forward. There was a struggle, a report, and the man in the dressing gown sank lifeless to the floor.

The sound of the shot was followed by a shout from the garden below. The window of the bedroom was thrown open a moment later, and a voice called:

"You are the police? I am John Pendleton. The man you want is here. I had to shoot him in self-defense."

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Gertrude Etheridge and her mother sat in their luxurious apartments at the Waldorf-Astoria. The girl was reading aloud from a New York paper.

"Listen, mother," she cried; "here is a paragraph announcing our arrival in New York and giving all the particulars of our inheriting Uncle Ned's fortune."

The mother's pale face went still whiter as she listened to the news item.

"I am sorry," she murmured. "I would not have had this story made public for worlds!"

"But why not, mother? After all our years of poverty and struggle in Australia, why should we be ashamed that Uncle Ned's unexpected legacy has placed us beyond want?"

"I can't explain," answered Mrs. Etheridge. "My fears may be groundless. Perhaps this paragraph may not have been seen by the person I fear. At any rate, don't worry. Be happy in Richard Draycott's love. A newly engaged girl should not be troubled by vague dangers which may not be real."

But even as she spoke, Mrs. Etheridge sprang to her feet, white and trembling. In the doorway stood a tall, handsome, gray-haired man. The newcomer was faultlessly dressed and had the bearing of a gentleman.

"George Etheridge!" moaned the panic-stricken woman. "My worst fears realized!"

"Mary!" said the visitor reproachfully. "Is this my welcome after all these long years? Do you think you can keep a father from his daughter forever?"

Mrs. Etheridge turned on him fiercely:

"You do very well to speak of this fatherly yearning which has been tugging at your heart strings so long and must have been the cause of incalculable suffering," she said. "Did you think of all these fine stage sentiments when you deserted us? When I was ill and in want? The yearning is not for me, or mine, it is a yearning to get possession of the fortune which by some mischievous chance you have heard we possess."

Gertrude, who had been a silent witness, dazed and disturbed by the conversation which she did not in the least understand, broke in—

"What does this mean, mamma? Am I not to understand? Who is this gentleman? What is he to us?"

"I am your father, Gertrude," he said softly and sadly, "your father whom you cannot remember and were led to believe was dead; who has so often hungered for a sight of your face when you were on the other side of the world," and he reached out his hands toward the girl as if he would have taken his daughter to his arms.

Gertrude, touched by the gentle sadness of his look, was moving toward the outstretched arms impulsively when her mother darted forward and drew her away, taking her stand between them.

"Listen, Gertrude," she said in a calm voice, her face very pale, her lips compressed, while she pointed an accusing finger at her husband, who at the sight of her stern face had sunk back.

"It is true, and may God help us! This man is your father, but he long ago forfeited all claims on us. When you were little more than a baby he deserted us. It was, after all, the kindest thing he could do. If it had not been for the money—the fortune your uncle left us—we should never have heard from him again. That is why I felt a fear when we came here to New York, knowing that it was his favorite haunt—that he might find us out, just when, after years of struggle, we were about to enjoy a little peace.

"It was not my fault," he went on, "that I was forced to leave you and your mother at the time she mentions. When I looked for you again you had fled. That early fall made me a changed man, and ever since I have been trying to get word of you—to find you out."

"You have explained yourself perfectly. I think we have heard quite enough. Gertrude, come away," taking her daughter by the arm, for she saw that the girl's tender heart was moved by the apparent sincerity of her father's words and that she already sympathized with him, nor saw behind the cunning mask of hypocrisy.

"One moment," said George Etheridge, thrusting himself between them and the door, a new light in his eyes. "You are going to cast me off, Mary, but you forget that I am Gertrude's father, and until she is of age I have some claim over her."

"I shall do anything if it be only to keep her away from you and out of reach of your designs," replied Mrs. Etheridge, and she drew her daughter hastily through the door, leaving him standing in the middle of the floor biting his lips and clinching his hands in rage.

"Well," he grumbled, after they had gone, "I had hoped that the years might have softened her a bit. But the old wrong has rankled all these years and grown more intense. Still, there is no reason for me to despair. That tender-hearted little Gertrude I can make an ally. I must manage to see her alone to win her over. How good it is that I was something of an actor in my day and have not forgotten some of the old tricks."

He turned about as if to leave the room when the sight of a letter Gertrude had been writing arrested his attention.

"Now I wonder what this might be," he asked himself as he picked it up and turned it over in his hands. "I may as well make the most of my opportunities," and he opened the unsealed envelope and drew out the letter, which he read with an amused twinkle in his eye.

"So! My little girl has engaged herself to be married, and that without even demanding her father's permission! It's good I saw this or perhaps the money might possibly have escaped me. For it is Gertrude's, or will be soon. Mary had ever a weak heart, and a sudden shock might bring disastrous results. And Richard Draycott is the young man's name. It seems to me that I have heard of that before. And here is his address." He took out a pencil and notebook and made a memorandum of the address. "I believe that this young man and I will form an acquaintance ere long. I'm sorry for him, but until certain things happen which will take time, such as my getting possession of that inheritance, I forbid the banns!"

Gertrude found it very hard to believe that a man who had spoken to her with such evident affection, who looked at her so yearningly, could be a thorough-paced hypocrite. A[illegible]

"I know what you are thinking about, Gerty. But come," jumping up from the chair, "we must leave here at once, before that man has a chance to return. We must, if necessary, resume our wanderings, at least until you are of age and out of his reach."

"But, Dick, mamma. He will expect to find us here," thinking of her lover, who for the first time in many weeks had escaped her mind for at least thirty minutes.

"Yes, to be sure. Well," and Mrs. Etheridge rose from strapping her trunk; "it will be very easy for you to write to him when we are located."

As the carriage, with their trunks, drove off, a man who had been sipping brandy for the last half-hour in a cafe across the way got into a carriage at the curb after muttering some directions to the driver, and set off in the same direction the coupe had taken.

"Going to give me the slip, eh?" remarked George Etheridge as he leaned back in his seat and blew a cloud of smoke from his cigar. "She is the same spirited woman she always was, and as quick to act. But does she think that I am not built the same way, and that I am going to let her carry off Gertrude and that comfortable pot of money?"

The front carriage zigzagged in and out the streets as if the occupants thought they were pursued, and were trying to throw the pursuer off the track. Several times in a crowded street he lost sight of their vehicle altogether. It was a satisfaction, therefore, for him to hear the driver call out, "The carriage has stopped, sir."

He saw that the coupe had drawn up before the curb near a very disreputable-looking tenement house, whose broken windows were stuffed with rags.

"Drive by slowly," he said to the driver.

As he passed the coupe he peered into it through the window, and then uttered an angry exclamation.

"Empty, by ——! The jade has played me a trick! They got out somewhere along the route.

"What a fool I was not to know that she is a woman of expedients, and not to be traced so easily. Well, she has tricked me beautifully, and I shall have a deuce of a time in finding her again. Oh, the young man—Draycott!" drawing his notebook from his pocket, in which he had copied out the address of Gertrude's fiance. "They will keep him advised of their whereabouts; I'll squeeze it out of him, and, anyway, I want to make his acquaintance. I'll reach him in a business way and not as the rogue of a husband they will be sure and tell him about."

Greatly cheered over the prospect of tracing his fugitive wife and daughter, Etheridge jumped in his carriage and drove off.

CHAPTER II.

A Chase and Its Ending.

WHEN a young man is as deeply in love as Richard Draycott believed himself to be he is not inclined to spend overmuch time on dry matters of business, which keep him away from the girl he hopes to marry.

So it was that Draycott arrived at the hotel about an hour after Mrs. Etheridge and her daughter had taken their abrupt leave.

They went off very suddenly," said the clerk.

Draycott was at a loss to understand the meaning of this sudden caprice. He knew very little of the Etheridges save what he had learned during their shipboard acquaintance. Had he not been overhasty in tumbling into love with a girl of whose antecedents he knew absolutely nothing? Perhaps he was the dupe of a couple of adventuresses! But, no; he was not ready to think that! The mother had had a checkered career; she had hinted as much; but the daughter—he would never believe anything wrong of her.

As he stood before the entrance to the hotel puzzling over the question a gen-